4. AN OLD RECORD OF A BLUE PIGEON ALECTROENAS SPECIES AND SEA-BIRDS ON FARQUHAR AND PROVIDENCE

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While working on manuscripts in the Old Indian Office, London, Stoddart found the following statement in a document about voyages in the southwest Indian Ocean in 1821-22, written by Captain (later Admiral of the Fleet Sir) Fairfax Moresby:

> "Jean de Nova i.e. Farquhar and Providence ... like the Amirantes, Coetivy and Alphonse are the resort of Millions of Birds of which, the Frigate Bird, the Fou, a beautiful small white gull, a variety of various coloured Gannet, and the Tropic Bird are the principle: In S. Pierre and Providence a species of small blue pigeon are in great abundance, and so seldom disturbed that they do not fly at Man's approach, but are knock'd down with Sticks, we found them excessively good eating, these birds build and nest on the Mapou tree and other Dwarf trees which cover the surface of the islands ..."

The "small blue pigeon" must have been a species of Blue Pigeon, Alectroenas. We know of no other reference to its occurrence on Farquhar, Providence or St Pierre. Stoddart spent 19 September 1968 on Farquhar, traversing most of the atoll land (see maps in Stoddart and Poore 1970 and Watson, Zusi and Storer 1963, 184), but saw no blue pigeons. The genus Alectroenas is endemic to the Malagasy Region. It was formerly represented on Mauritius, and is still so on Malagasy (Madagascar), the Comoros, Aldabra and the Seychelles (Goodwin 1967, 380-384). There may also have been a form on Rodriguez, A. rodericana (Milne-Edwards), known only from bones (Hachisuka 1953, 180). According to Rountree and others (1952, 187), the Mauritius form, A. nitidissima (Scopoli), became extinct about 1831, though Renshaw (1939) gives the date as early as 1826. Penny (1967, 272) writes of the "declining numbers" and edibility of A. pulcherrima (Scopoli) in the Seychelles. The Comoro form, A. s. sganzini (Bonaparte), was reported by Benson (1960, 52) as very confiding and excellent eating, though still plentiful. Nevertheless representations were made at the Conference of the International Council for Bird Preservation in New York in 1962 for its proper protection (IX Bull. I.C.B.P., 1963, 38, 41). We can confirm that on Aldabra A. sganzini minor Berlepsch is extremely confiding. It is still plentiful in the southeast of the atoll. Tameness and palatability, both mentioned in Moresby's account, were undoubtedly the undoing of Alectroenas on St Pierre and Providence, and presumably Mauritius too.

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Of the other species (sea birds) mentioned in Moresby's account, Watson and others (1963, 185-188) mention neither frigatebirds Fregata spp. nor tropicbirds Phaethon spp. "Fou" is French for a gannet, so that it would appear that there were at least two Sula spp. Watson and others (1963) list both S. dactylatra and sula as breeding on Farquhar. The "beautiful small white gull" was presumably the Fairy Tern Gygis alba, which according to Watson and others (1963) breeds on Providence.

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